

Invalid specimen records of Saffron-cowled Blackbird *Xanthopsar flavus* from Argentina and Paraguay

by Rosendo M. Fraga

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Properly labeled museum specimens represent a principal data source for avian distributions. In the case of rare and threatened species, specimens document past localities and may provide evidence of historical range contractions (Collar *et al.* 1992), which is one of the main criteria for assigning threat status (Mace & Stuart 1991). Most reviews of the ranges of such taxa assume correct identification of skins, making it important to report incorrectly labelled museum specimens.

Saffron-cowled Blackbird *Xanthopsar flavus* is currently considered Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2004). Five specimens attributed to this species held in the Instituto Miguel Lillo, Tucumán, Argentina, are misidentified. I personally checked the specimens and their labels on 9 November 2006. Specimen numbers are those of the Lillo collection.

Specimen 02931 was collected by J. Esteban on 10 November 1944 at Colonia Dalmacia, prov. Formosa, Argentina, near the río Monte Lindo. It is an immature male Unicoloured Blackbird *Agelasticus cyanopus*, of the nominate race, with a female-type plumage but black cheeks. This transitional plumage was described by Parkes (1966). Because of its yellow underparts the specimen was wrongly labelled by the collector as Saffron-cowled Blackbird. The specimen was reported by Esteban (1953) and included by Collar *et al.* (1992) as the only such record of *X. flavus* for prov. Formosa. Specimens 05108 (male) and 05109 (female) were collected by S. Pierotti on 4 November 1947 at San Cosme, prov. Corrientes. The specimens are typical adult male and female Unicoloured Blackbirds of the nominate race. Both were reported by Esteban (1953) and included by Collar *et al.* (1992). These were the only specimen records of Saffron-cowled Blackbird for Corrientes west of the extensive Iberá marshes. On the other hand, there are several valid specimens of Saffron-cowled Blackbirds from eastern Corrientes, particularly in the Museo Argentino de Ciencias Naturales (MACN), Buenos Aires (e.g. Darrieu & Camperi 1994).

The remaining two specimens attributed to *X. flavus* are female Unicolored Blackbirds. Specimen 02941 was collected on 7 November 1903 by Venturi and Rodríguez at Mocoví, prov. Chaco, Argentina, according to the original label. However, M. Pearman (*in litt.* 2007) informs me that Mocoví is not in Chaco prov., but in north-east prov. Santa Fe, close to the provincial border. The specimen was not mentioned by Collar *et al.* (1992), though it was the only putative *X. flavus* specimen for prov. Chaco. Specimen 7914 was collected by 'S. P.' (S. Pierotti?), on 14 December 1944, at Río Apa, dpto. Concepción, Paraguay, on the border with Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil. It was not mentioned by Collar *et al.* (1992) or any other similar source.

The original labels of these five were subsequently corrected by anonymous hands to *Agelaius cyanopus*, and the specimens are now kept with others of Unicoloured Blackbird, but the corrections were not made public. It appears that the Lillo collection has no valid specimens of Saffron-cowled Blackbird.

The persistent confusion of Saffron-cowled and Unicoloured Blackbirds was already mentioned by Hartert & Venturi (1909), but this comment was apparently ignored, perhaps because it was in French. Even the Swedish–Argentine ornithologist C. C. Olog, who worked at the Lillo Institute, confused these icterids in his first field guide (Olog 1959), as is evident from fig. 791. Olog's first guide was the only one available to Argentine field

workers until 1978 (pers. obs.). Sight records of Saffron-cowled Blackbirds from Argentina in the 1960s and 1970s are therefore somewhat suspect.

Another plausible outcome of my findings concerns the past distribution of Saffron-cowled Blackbird in north-east Argentina. The existence of historical populations in Chaco and Formosa could be considered hypothetical, as there is no longer documentation for its presence there. The two valid specimens from Santa Fe in the Museo de Entre Ríos (Freiberg 1943) were collected near the city of Santa Fe, c.380 km south of Mocoví and outside the *Chaco* biogeographical region (Fraga *et al.* 1998). There is no irrefutable evidence that Saffron-cowled Blackbird has retracted its range in the *Chaco* in recent history. We therefore have evidence of a range retraction only in prov. Buenos Aires, in the *Pampas* region; this drastic decline is evidenced by several correctly identified specimens (Collar *et al.* 1992, Fraga *et al.* 1998).

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Address: Centro de Investigaciones Científicas de Entre Ríos (CICYTTP), Conicet, España y Matteri, (3105) Diamante, Entre Ríos, Argentina, e-mail: chfraga@yahoo.com